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ARTICLE

Platonism, Christianity, Stoicism: The Subject, The Truth, And The Political Import Of Their Relationship In Three Traditions

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ABSTRACT: Foucault has been criticized for overlooking the similarities among Platonism, Christianity and Stoicism, and overstating Stoicism's distinctness. However, an examination of Stoic theories of truth shows that the Stoics sought out a particular kind of knowledge, and that this knowledge was necessarily sought by means of a certain circular process, to which Foucault himself vaguely alludes. This accounts for many of Foucault's observations, and explains why, even when Stoics speak about such topics as self-knowledge and self-renunciation in ways that recall Platonism and Christianity, their approach is rightly characterized as differing from that of their Platonic and Christian counterparts. Ultimately, this sheds light on Stoicism's import for politics. In short, only by the Stoic will the search for truth be carried out in such a way that the individual's identity will neither reinforce, nor be reinforced by his or her grasp of the truth; and this will uniquely prepare the Stoic to enter the political domain and to be recognized there as someone who speaks the truth.

Keywords: askêsis, hermeneutics, epimeleia, metanoia, self-knowledge

In a rather sweeping way, Foucault characterizes the differences among three distinct philosophical-religious traditions upon which the search for truth can be modeled, the Platonic, the Christian, and the Hellenistic, or more specifically, the Stoic. Here, Foucault speaks of "the model I will call 'Platonic,' which gravitated around recollection; the 'Hellenistic' model, which turns on the self-finalization of the relationship to the self; and the 'Christian' model, which turns on self-exegesis and self-renunciation."¹

But even according to Foucault himself, this is to grossly oversimplify the differences among these three traditions. Whenever Foucault singles out some aspect of Stoicism particular to it, he later qualifies this claim. This paper's task, then, is to take the rough-and-ready

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¹ Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-1982*, translated by Graham Burchell (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 258.

distinctions Foucault draws between Stoicism on the one hand and Platonism and Christianity on the other and, retaining these distinctions, refine them in order to redraw them with greater precision than Foucault did himself, but as Foucault *could* have drawn them in response to criticism. This is undertaken in order to more accurately specify Stoicism's contemporary significance.

How to characterize the differences between these traditions without exaggerating them? First, we should acknowledge the similarities among the three that Foucault did not always take pains to acknowledge. We must acknowledge the similarities in the hope that their differences will stand out *more* clearly against the background of their commonalities. We do so with the final aim of reaffirming that at least one difference that Foucault observed was real and significant. This done, we can understand why this crucial difference would have interested Foucault and specifically why he would have found it to be a far from a minor point of difference—if he had explicitly drawn its implications for political life.

If it were not such a difficult task, we would follow the common threads that weave in and out of each tradition, making one difficult to disentangle from the next.² Instead, we can only attempt the less difficult task of examining the one aspect of Stoicism that Foucault regards as most significantly setting it apart from Platonism and Christianity, i.e. the fact that Stoicism does not aim at a kind of self-knowledge requiring self-renunciation. We shall (1) assess whether Foucault is correct in finding *this* to be a significant difference, regardless how much this finding has to be qualified, and (2) assess the ramifications this difference might have for politics and political life.

In the end, we shall argue that being a Stoic puts one in a better position to disbelieve what passes for truth in society and thereby prepares one to enter into political life without being subject to the forces of suasion that hold sway in society at large. This is *not* to say that *only* Stoicism is politically important, or that only the Stoic is capable of challenging the political status quo. To be sure, Platonists and Christians may be forces of social change in their own right. But we shall maintain that Foucault does identify one specific way in which the Stoic is capable of being a force of social change in a way that the Platonist and the Christian are not.

Foucault may only observe the outward signs or manifestations, the effects rather than the causes, of what sets the Stoic apart. But we shall attempt to fully account for the outward differences Foucault observes between the ways in which Stoicism, Platonism, and Christianity are practiced, and to conclude that their differences are *not* merely superficial, but deep-rooted. What differences does Foucault observe? He observes a tendency to seek something like self-knowledge but by none of the usual means of self-searching or self-renunciation. The

² The points of similarity and difference between Platonism and Stoicism, and the influence of one upon the other are set out in *Platonic Stoicism – Stoic Platonism*, and the relationship between Stoicism in Christianity in Richard Sorabji's *Emotion and Peace of Mind* and Troels Engberg-Pederson's *Paul and the Stoics*. Mauro Bonazzi and Christopher Helmig, *Platonic Stoicism – Stoic Platonism: The Dialogue Between Platonism and Stoicism in Antiquity* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2007); Richard Sorabji, *Emotion and Peace of Mind: From Stoic Agitation to Christian Temptation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Troels Engberg-Pederson, *Paul and the Stoics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000).

deeper, underlying reasons for this reside in the Stoics' conception of truth, and the way they conceive the means of its attainment.

The differences in the way the Platonist, Christian, and Stoic carry out a search for truth and personal enlightenment are indeed slight, but they are significant, and this significance shows itself precisely in the implications each approach has in political practice. Where Foucault himself offers very few clues as to Stoicism's direct implications for politics, we can offer at least one: Politics itself *demand*ed for the Stoics, and perhaps *still* demands of those engaged in political life that they *first* seek out the truth in way that is specifically designed to prepare them to enter the political sphere.

Defining Stoicism, Platonism, and Christianity

It will be important to clarify at the outset what is meant by Platonism, Stoicism, and Christianity. Stoicism alone is a philosophy that took on many different forms over the course of its 600 year development. Here, we focus in particular on the Stoicism of Seneca. His Stoicism may be a Stoicism all his own, and it may be difficult to demonstrate that his Stoicism is identical in all particulars to that of the earliest Stoics. While this in some sense will have to be accepted, we can show that those ideas to be discussed here resonate with those of the earliest Stoics. Indeed, based on what little we know of the ideas of the early Stoics, they seem only to lend philosophical support and justification to Seneca's.³ For Seneca articulates a set of ideas that can be understood only if they are understood in relation to the Stoic tradition out of which they emerge. As for Platonism, we shall only interest ourselves of a particular set of ideas which can be taken as representative of the Platonic tradition and which can be found in the possibly spurious *Acibiades*. These are a set of ideas, which although influential for Platonists and Neo-Platonists, must not necessarily be identified with those of Socrates or Plato. Finally, in speaking of Christianity, we restrict ourselves to the views expressed only by the Christian thinkers to be discussed.

Toward a Political Stoicism

It was difficult for Foucault himself to know in what direction the work of this period would take him. After delivering the lectures comprising the *Hermeneutics of the Subject* in 1981 and

³ Commonly Seneca's "unorthodox" appropriation of the Stoic tradition often disqualifies him as a representative of that tradition; then his "clumsy" attempt to combine it with apparently contradictory ideas disqualifies him as a real philosopher with a coherent body of thought. However, those ideas for which he is usually considered "unorthodox" concern his dualistic views concerning the soul and body that he is presumed to have taken from Plato, and which are held to be "inconsistent" with true Stoicism. These are ideas Foucault gives diminished emphasis and that we shall not mention here. However, Reydamas-Schils has taken even those of Seneca's remarks that seem most in conflict with his Stoicism and shown them to exist in perfect continuity with it. Gretchen Reydamas-Schils, "Seneca's Platonism: The Soul and its Divine Origin," in, Andrea Nightingale and David Sedley (eds.), *Ancient Models of Mind: Studies in Human and Divine Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 196-215. Some common readings of Seneca which would place him either under the influence of Plato or Posidonius are discussed by Inwood in his "Seneca and Psychological Dualism" in *Reading Seneca, Stoic Philosophy at Rome* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 27-30.

1982, Foucault fully admits in 1983 that what he would like to do is to bring his study of this material to a close “in order to return after this several years long Greco-Roman ‘trip,’ to some more contemporary problems.”⁴ Foucault clearly hoped to gain from the Stoics some greater insight into relationship between the care of the self and the political that would allow him to look on contemporary problems with fresh eyes. For Foucault remarked that the Stoics, more than any other Hellenistic school, saw these two things as intertwined to a remarkable degree.⁵ But it was ironically because he had not yet found a direct route to the answering of the question of Stoicism's relevance to politics, that Foucault abandoned the search too soon. This occurred when the phenomenon of *parrhesia* abruptly caught his eye.

The political implications Foucault would have eventually drawn from Stoicism may have become clearer to himself and to us—that is, if Foucault had not suddenly changed his research's trajectory when he stumbled upon *parrhesia*. Foucault recognized then the drawback of interrupting his train of thought and turning to *parrhesia*. “However,” he said, “this drawback was compensated for by the fact that I drew a bit closer to a theme which, after all, has always been present in my analysis of...the relations of power and their role in the interplay between the subject and truth.”⁶ Turning from Stoicism to *parrhesia*, Foucault appears to have been lured away from the Stoics to a subject matter with more direct implications for power and politics.

But this, of course, depends upon what is meant by “power and politics.” Foucault is clear that his work does not have any relevance for politics, and still less to do with resisting political power, if these words are understood in their usual sense. They usually denote institutions and laws. Understood only as obedient to certain laws and having only certain rights with regard to political institutions, individuals appear to have little power to resist or change them. But there is another kind of power that is often exercised at the political level, and in other spheres of life, that Foucault calls “governmentality” that he defines as “the whole range of practices that constitute, define, organize, and instrumentalize the strategies that individuals, in their freedom, can use in dealing with each other.”⁷ Governmentality occurs whenever, in organizing social relations, one takes account of the freedom that other people can exercise over themselves, and over other people. Players in the game of power themselves increasingly attend to the freedom of others, taking account of it in developing their strategies for controlling the conduct of others, or attempting to prevent their own conduct from being controlled. Foucault takes it into account as well. Foucault observes that the freedom we have over ourselves can be taken advantage of by others, and can in many cases allow others to exercise con-

⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Courage of the Truth*, translated by Graham Burchell (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 1-2.

⁵ Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 59.

⁶ Foucault, *The Courage of the Truth*, 8.

⁷ Michel Foucault, “The Ethics of the Care for the Self as a Process of Freedom,” in Paul Rabinow (eds.), *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* (New York: The New Press, 1997), 298.

trol over us.⁸ However, Foucault is interested in the opportunities that individuals seize to exercise the freedom they have over themselves. Since the ways in which individuals do so is not without the ability to influence, modify, or otherwise effect how control is exercised over them, they may take advantage of their ability to act freely in a way that makes them more difficult to control as well.

Truth is not irrelevant of course. Insofar as it is because we wish either to apply or attain some truth that we adopt certain relationships to ourselves and other people, while these relationships in turn shape the kind of truth of which we go in search.

If in wandering from Stoicism, Foucault was looking for more evidence of what he had long suspected, that our relationship to the truth is never personal and solitary, but is always mediated by others, then in *parrhesia*, Foucault *did* find confirmation of the fact that, "The other is indispensable for the practice of the self to arrive at the self at which it aims."⁹ After discovering *parrhesia*, he then begins to examine in the process of coming to learn the truth the role another person can play, because there is indeed, he says, "this other person indispensable for me to be able to tell the truth about myself."¹⁰ Thus, he was lured away from the topic of Stoicism as such by a subject matter promising more immediate implications for politics.

But is there another sense in which the subject matter from which Foucault allowed his thoughts to stray was no less political? Foucault turned away from Stoicism just when he had begun to study the way in which Stoics pursued knowledge, and perhaps even self-knowledge, in silent dialogue with themselves, absent the input of an interlocutor. While this activity seems *apolitical* in the sense that it is carried on, so much as is possible, apart from the influence of other people, through this activity, the Stoic attempts to build a relationship to the truth on his own terms, without depending on others, even friends, for assistance. In this way, the activity *becomes* political. It becomes political, Foucault suspects, because by engaging in this activity the individual frees himself of the social forces that determine his action.¹¹ But is

⁸ By these means a "subjectivization" takes place that "ties the individual to himself, and submits him to others in this way" (Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (Summer, 1982), 781).

⁹ Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 127.

¹⁰ Foucault, *The Courage of the Truth*, 5.

¹¹ Foucault comes closest to claiming this overtly when he writes that "there is no first or final point of resistance to political power other than in the relationship one has to oneself. In other words, what I mean is this: if we take the question of power, of political power, situating it in the more general question of governmentality understood as a strategic field of power relations in the broadest and not merely political sense of the term, if we understand by governmentality a strategic field of power relations in their mobility, transformability, and reversibility, then I do not think that reflection on this notion of governmentality can avoid passing through, theoretically and practically, the element of a subject defined by the relationship of self to self. Although the theory of political power as an institution usually refers to a juridical conception of the subject of right, it seems to me that the analysis of governmentality—that is to say, of power as a set of reversible relationships—must refer to an ethics of the subject defined by the relationship of self to self. Quite simply, this means that in the type of analysis I have been trying to advance for some time you can see that power relations, governmentality, the government of the self and of others, and the relationship of the self to

this activity political in the merely negative sense of freeing us from power relations? Is it not also political in an additional sense because it, in some way, prepares us to reenter the field of power relations and to ourselves become players in the game?

Let us return then to the very line of thought Foucault was pursuing at the time in order to see where it might have taken him if he had not abandoned it so abruptly, and how it *might* have eventually led him back to the subject of politics.

A Circular Movement

Pierre Hadot, in the course of his “interrupted dialogue” with Foucault, claimed that he had underestimated the Platonic-Christian elements in Stoicism. Indeed, if there is any reason why scholars of Stoicism believe Foucault’s interpretation is to be rejected, it is because they believe Foucault overlooked those aspects of the philosophy which make the subject’s relationship to the truth the conventional one found in the Platonic-Christian tradition.¹²

In what follows, we shall suggest that the similarities between the Platonic and the Stoic are most clearly articulated by Foucault when he speaks of both the Platonist and the Stoic as following a circular path. This, we can take to be an allusion to the hermeneutic circle obliquely referred to in the title of his course, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*. The circular path that Foucault describes both the Stoic and the Platonist as walking takes one away from oneself. Leaving behind the self one currently is, one moves closer to the truth, and then finally returns to oneself, so that one can be oneself in a fuller sense that one was before. In brief: One leaves behind the old self, achieves knowledge, and returns to oneself. When Foucault speaks of this in reference to Platonism, he refers to it as the “Platonic circle.”¹³

Foucault sees a circular process at work in Stoicism as well. But he speaks of it in much vaguer terms. He speaks of a subject who sets out on a circular journey, at the end of which one, so to speak, finds oneself. The self, he says, “basically appeared as the aim, the end of an uncertain and possibly circular journey (*éventuellement circulaire*)”¹⁴ In order to make this journey one must acquire a certain kind of knowledge, and “the subject must advance toward something that is himself.”¹⁵ This, he says, is

self constitute a chain, a thread, and I think it is around these notions that we should be able to connect together the question of politics and of ethics” (*Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 252).

¹² Foucault describes self-transformation as performed *in the service of the self*, when in fact, Hadot says, it must be seen as a process of *renouncing* the self for the sake of something more important—namely the truth. His case against an asceticism of “egoism” is as follows: “Philosophers have always, in Plato no less than in the Stoics, (let us leave the Epicureans aside for the moment), made an effort to undo themselves from the partial self (*moi*)...It is fundamentally simple: from the moment one attempts to subject oneself to reason, one is almost necessarily obliged to renounce egoism” (Pierre Hadot, *The Present Alone is Our Happiness: Conversations with Jeannie Carlier and Arnold I. Davidson*, translated by Marc Djaballah (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 107).

¹³ Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 191.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 248.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 248.

...the important, difficult, not very clear, and ambiguous theme of return. What does it mean to return to oneself? (*Qu'est-ce que veut dire retourner à soi?*) What is this circle (*cercle*), this loop (*boucle*), this falling back (*cerepli*) that we must carry out with regard to something, yet something that is not given to us [i.e. the self], since we at best are promised it at the end of our life? The two elements we must try to disentangle are movement and return; the subject's movement toward himself, and the self's turning back on itself (*Déplacement et retour—déplacement du sujet vers lui-même et retour de soi sur soi—, ce sont ces deux éléments qu'il faut essayer de débrouiller*).¹⁶

We shall see that Foucault does go on in subsequent lectures to explain in what this loop or circle consists for the Stoics, although not very plainly. We shall refer to it as the circle by which the Stoic is led to the truth, and then back toward the person he or she wishes to be. We shall argue that this process of attaining truth has the character of a hermeneutic circle.

The Possibility of a Hermeneutic

Let us briefly explain the "Platonic circle." For Foucault, it is given its most paradigmatic expression the *Alcibiades*, where the problem raised is of how we can come to know ourselves:

To care for the self one must know oneself; to know oneself one must look at oneself in an element that is the same as the self; in this element one must look at that which is the very source of thought and knowledge; this source is the divine element. To see oneself one must therefore look at oneself in the divine element: One must know the divine in order to see oneself.¹⁷

In the *Alcibiades*, the question is how the self can know itself. The problem is the same for the eye. The eye cannot see itself—unless it catches sight of its own reflection. Similarly, we do not appear capable of seeing ourselves except when we find our mirror image reflected back to us in the external world. If paradoxically then, we must deflect our look away from ourselves in order to see ourselves more.¹⁸ Specifically, we must look toward what is divine in the cosmos; we must be reminded of our divine nature. In brief, "From that moment on you can see that for Platonism, knowledge and access to the truth could only take place on condition of a spiritual movement of the soul with regard to itself and the divine: with regard to the divine because it was connected with itself, and with regard to itself because it was connected with the divine."¹⁹ We have here the beginnings of a hermeneutic circle since *the more one knows the divine, the more one knows oneself, and the more one knows oneself, the more one knows the divine*.

It could of course be objected immediately that there is no such hermeneutic in Stoicism. For a hermeneutic, for Foucault, implies the process by which one comes to know and to understand one thing—the self—and precisely what is characteristic of Stoicism is that there is

¹⁶ Ibid., 248; *L'Herméneutique du sujet*, 240.

¹⁷ Ibid., 70-71.

¹⁸ *Alcibiades* 133c.

¹⁹ Ibid., 77

no “inner” self to be unearthed, exhumed, exposed and examined. This at first appears to be what distinguishes Stoicism: The Stoic does not seek self-knowledge.

Indeed, Foucault goes on to ask whether the ways in which the Stoics focus attention upon themselves “entail or call for a fundamental and continuous task of knowledge of what we will call the human subject, the human soul, human interiority, the interiority of consciousness, etcetera?”²⁰ In other words, he asks whether the intense attention that Stoics devote to themselves, indicates that they are scrutinizing themselves in order to arrive at an understanding of who they are. He eventually denies this, and so this seems to be the greatest difference that distinguished the Stoic—that he does not strive toward self-knowledge.

But Foucault himself acknowledges that to deny that the Stoic seeks self-knowledge may be to oversimplify. Self-care, by definition, seems to require that we look at ourselves, which seems to imply that we look at ourselves *in order to see who we are*, in order to distinguish the true from the false self, or as Hadot will say, the “higher” from the “lower” self. In any case, Foucault has acknowledged from the outset that all forms of self-care demand of us that we redirect our attention toward ourselves:

Second, the *epimeleia heautou* is also a certain form of attention, of looking. Being concerned about oneself implies that we look away from the outside to... I was going to say ‘inside.’ Let’s leave to one side this word, which you can well imagine raises a host of problems, and just say we must convert our looking from the outside, from others and the world etc., towards ‘oneself.’ The care of the self implies a certain way of attending to what we think and what takes place in our thought. The word *epimeleia* is related to *meletê*, which means both exercise and meditation. Again, this will all have to be elucidated.”²¹

Where is our attention directed, then, Foucault asks if not *inward*, presumably so that we may expose what is buried within ourselves to the light of day? What kind of knowledge then can this be that one then attains, if not a knowledge of *the self*?

Foucault begins by describing in a way that is “very schematic and will be developed in more detail later,”²² the superficial differences between Platonism, Stoicism, and Christianity, alighting first on the differences between Platonism and Christianity. Here he reverts continually to the *Alcibiades*, in order to show that Platonic themes are taken up by Christians. Gnostic movements put the same emphasis on knowledge of the self. Christianity will do much the same.²³ But Christians carry these themes in a new direction; the self that must be known is not the divine self that perceives the truth, but the worldly self that stands between the individual and an unobstructed view of the truth.²⁴

It is for this reason that, when Foucault analyzes Tertullian’s *De Paenitentia* (circa 155-225), he finds Christians telling a different conversion story than Platonists. Platonic *epistrophê* is a ‘turning around’ toward the truth and toward oneself. But Platonic *epistrophê* is trans-

²⁰ Ibid., 258.

²¹ Ibid., 11.

²² Ibid., 210.

²³ Ibid., 16.

²⁴ Ibid., 173.

formed into Christian *metanoia*. *Metanoia* occurs when one is abruptly transformed into a completely different person, one who is, suddenly able to see truth. This would seem to give Foucault a clue with respect to the differences between Stoicism and Christianity. For Stoicism does not seem to require the kind of total and absolute self-renunciation that is always a precondition for *metanoia*, since the self cannot be reborn without the casting off of an old self—all at once. This, at last, seems to be the real difference between Stoicism and Christianity, if not between Stoicism and Platonism.

But even here Foucault only seems to be able to assert a difference of degree and not of kind between Stoicism and Christianity. He notes: "There are some expressions [used by Stoics] which seem to indicate something like a break between the self and self, and like a sudden radical change and transfiguration of the self."²⁵ Prefacing his comments by saying, "First, there is not exactly a break. At least, here we must be a little bit more precise and I will try to develop this a bit more later,"²⁶ he tentatively asserts that Stoics do not attempt—at least not as suddenly and rapidly as Christians do—to sever all worldly ties with the person they have been. Foucault then offers hypotheses as to why this is,²⁷ but he never quite explains *why* the Stoic's *relationship to truth* would differ enough from the Christian's *as to require a less drastic but still significant measure of self-renunciation*.

We return then to the difference between Stoicism and Platonism. Stoicism seems much closer to Platonism; the differences between the two are more subtle. But the differences do not seem to be only of degree, but of kind: Firstly, a Stoic does not seek self-knowledge as we usually understand it, although Foucault must admit, in order to be a Stoic, it does appear necessary that you *excute et varie scrutare et observa*, that is 'dissect yourself, dig deep in different ways and look everywhere.'²⁸ Secondly, in order to gain knowledge, the Stoic does not seem to have to turn away from the world in quite the same manner as the Platonist. For attaining knowledge does not appear to require "the soul's release from the body, the prison-

²⁵ Ibid., 212.

²⁶ Ibid., 212. The nature of this break is not a subject that is returned to, or that receives more detailed analysis after this lecture delivered during the first hour on the 10th of February, 1982. However, on February 17th, he does return to the subject, though in order to take the more conservative line that even though Seneca speaks of the soul breaking free of its bodily abode, there is no break in the strong sense of the term for the Stoics. This is because they do not aspire to pass from one to another plane of existence. It is of course this claim that is disputed by critics and to which we will return in what follows (Ibid., 280-285).

²⁷ Foucault hypothesizes that Stoics free themselves or shed those aspects of their existence that they do not control, but not the body or the physical self. "There is not a cesura within the self, by which the self tears itself away from itself and renounces itself in order to be reborn in a figurative death" (Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 212).

²⁸ Ep. xvi.2; Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 213. Here Foucault fully acknowledges the sense in which the self becomes an object of examination, and perhaps of knowledge. The Stoics, as he notes, often use the phrases *blepe se*, 'consider yourself' (Marcus Aurelius, *Med.* VII.55, VIII.3), *observate*, 'observe yourself' (Seneca, Ep. Xvi.2) *se respicere*, 'look at yourself' (Seneca, Ep. lxxxiii.2).

body, the tomb-body, etcetera.”²⁹ But as Foucault will concede, it will sometimes require a Stoic like Seneca to *fugere a se*, ‘to flee himself’.³⁰

We will discover the reasons Foucault observed a diminished emphasis among the Stoics, first, on self-knowledge, and second, on self-renunciation as the means to self-knowledge. We will discover this if we look to what the Stoics themselves said about truth. For the differences that Foucault observes between the Stoics and their Christian and Platonic counterparts can be explained by the way the Stoics thought about truth and the means of its attainment.

The Stoics and Truth

The first thing to be understood about Seneca is that, if he subscribes to the views of his Stoic predecessors, he espouses a broadly pragmatic and coherentist account of truth. According to this account, true knowledge does not rest upon firmly established axioms, but remains consistent with a set of perceptions about the world that have practical value. To have *epistêmê*, ‘scientific knowledge,’ or *technê*, ‘technical knowledge’ is to have “a systematic set (*sustêma*) of cognitive acts, coordinated (*suggegumnasenôn*) with a view toward some useful goal (*telos*) in life.”³¹ This is to make of knowledge a set of perceptions (*phantasia*), whose value lies in their ability to work conjointly with each other, so as to help the knower attain given ends. The results are twofold in that the “truth” of a perception lies, first, in its ability to coexist alongside and to cooperate with other impressions, and second, in its ability to contribute along with those perceptions to the attainment of practical objectives.

However, the Stoics do not believe that the only thing that makes something “true” is its consistency with a larger set of beliefs. The beliefs of the knower are derived from perceptions, and if we perceive a fact directly and clearly, it is true. “This impression, being self-evident and striking, all but seizes us by the hair, they say, and pulls us to assent, needing nothing else to achieve this effect or establish its difference from other impressions.”³² Nevertheless, an impression is only accepted according to later Stoics, “which has no impediment,” and does not sit uncomfortably with other beliefs.³³ Thus, one criterion of truth remains the consistency of one belief with others.

It is more the case for a virtuous person with true beliefs than a vicious person with false beliefs that a belief is true which coheres with the rest of one’s beliefs. For a person with false beliefs, in an effort to keep his or her beliefs consistent, assents to false perceptions. The objective of a well-lived life is therefore to attain a fully self-consistent set of beliefs, such that

²⁹ Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 209.

³⁰ Ibid. 212, 275; “Until now, however, you have done nothing: you have escaped many pitfalls, but you have not escaped yourself (*mult aeffugisti, te nondum*)” (*Ques. Nat.* 1.pr.6.8).

³¹ Olympiodorus, *Commentary on Plato’s Gorgias*, translated by Jackson, Lycos, and Tarrant (Leiden-Boston-Köln: Brill; 1998), ad 462b6, 121; LS 42A. The same definition is quoted by Sextus Empiricus, *Adv. Math.* II.10 and Quintillian II.xvn.41. Reference to knowledge as a *systêma* or ‘system’ of interlocking perceptions is also found in Epictetus (*Dis.* I.20) and in Galen (*PHP* V.3.1).

³² Sextus Empiricus, *Adv. Math.* VII.255; LS 40K.

³³ Sextus Empiricus, *Adv. Math.* VII.253; LS 40K.

it is impossible for one to assent to a false impression.³⁴ But ultimately, as Graver puts it, “our ways of interpreting and responding to states of affairs are determined by our mental states.” Thus “the propositions we accept as true are just those which we recognize as fitting with beliefs we already hold.”³⁵ Our own dispositions and not the impressions we receive are themselves to blame for our accepting them.³⁶

This opens the door to a Foucauldian interpretation of Stoicism. For what Foucault discovered soon enough was that a Stoic had no single criterion of truth, no belief or set of beliefs by which the truth or falsity of others could be judged.

This leads Foucault to just one of the most important ways in which the Stoic appears to attain knowledge, forcefully exemplified by Seneca in his *Questiones Naturales*. In this immense tome, Seneca looks out upon creation and the whole of the natural world in a way that recalls Platonism, in reference to which Foucault spoke of “a movement of ascent and descent.”³⁷ Recall that the Platonist’s gaze moves upward toward the divine and then, downward and inward toward the self. Now, Seneca will do something similar. He will look outward toward nature in order to—seemingly—look inward toward himself.

The Stoic is indeed after *some* kind of knowledge, and Foucault does not hesitate to speak of it, although in a qualified sense, as a kind of “self-knowledge,” even saying “I have tried to show, first of all, that if self-knowledge was indeed a fundamental theme...”³⁸

But Foucault denies that Stoics like Seneca are striving for self-knowledge, as we usually understand it, because “...self-knowledge found its place, rather, in a *certain relationship of reciprocal links between knowledge of nature and knowledge of the self*.”³⁹ Foucault speaks here of “reciprocal links” between two kinds of knowledge. He speaks, that is, of the way in which these two kinds of knowledge—*knowledge of the self* and *knowledge of nature*—are mutually reinforcing. Although he does eventually deny that it is our *knowledge of the self* that reinforces and is reinforced by our knowledge of nature, something similar is the case. This itself warrants calling the search for truth in which the Stoic is engaged a “hermeneutic,” although Foucault will never use that precise term again.

“What can the Stoics mean when they insist on the need...to direct the gaze on the self, and when, at the same time, they associate this conversion and inflection of the gaze onto the self with the entire course of the order of the world and with its general and internal organization?”⁴⁰ We can only hope to answer this question by explaining what Seneca hopes to gain

³⁴ Stobaeus, *Ecl.* 2.73.16-74.3, *LS* 41H, *SVF* 3.112; *Ecl.* 2.111 18-112,8, *LS* 41G, *SVF* 3.548.

³⁵ Graver, *Cicero on the Emotions*, 86. Sextus claims for example that we favor beliefs which cohere with those we already hold (*Adv. Math.* 8.275-76, *SVF* 2.223).

³⁶ *De Fat.* 41.

³⁷ Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 71.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 258.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 259.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 260. He therefore proceeds as follows: “I would like to take the text in which Seneca puts to work the encyclopedic knowledge of the world to which Stoicism always accorded positive value, while claiming that we must turn our gaze on ourselves” (*Ibid.*, 261).

from surveying the world from up high, studying meteors, comets, the seas and the earth, and why we can “only hope to arrive at the self by passing through the great cycle of the world.”⁴¹

Universal Truth

We should pass in review before the different ways in which Seneca’s search for truth has often been misunderstood. For it has been misunderstood as a search for some more universal truth. Here, when Seneca undertakes to rise above the earth and seemingly, to view it from an “objective” distance he attempts the same thing as many other Stoics. We might also mention Cicero’s “Dream of Scipio” in the final part of *De Re Publica*, in which Scipio Africanus relates a dream he had on the eve of his victory over Carthage. He floats far above the earth, from which height, he is permitted to look down upon human affairs. His empire is a mere dot, his legacy soon to vanish. Things he once considered worldly goods, now appear as vain playthings, his former judgments as false. Even the things he once considered the reward for his earthy toil are suddenly deprived of their former value.

Traditionally, such scenes have been interpreted as evidence that the Stoics make it their goal to attain a universal and objective truth that can replace a subjective, first-person perspective of the world. Hannah Arendt provides an example of this sort of interpretation when she writes, that for Cicero, “thinking means following a sequence of reasoning that will lift you to a viewpoint outside the world of appearances as well as outside your own life.”⁴² In other words, things only appear evil here from our perspective on earth, and if we could adopt a more rational, more “objective” viewpoint on the world, we would see that every evil is a necessary part of a perfectly-ordered cosmos, and thus that what is evil from our own perspective merely seems so. Yet, there is no avoiding the way things always seem evil from our own perspective, so the philosopher must, so far as he is able, keep his eyes fixed only on the world as he sees it from a great height and close his eyes to, or “think away,” whatever contradicts this picture. The Stoics are therefore understood as urging us to adopt a more rational outlook on the world, *from the perspective of which our pre-philosophical preconceptions can be invalidated, voided, and annulled*.⁴³

Straight away, one sees what role truth would have in political life. The demands of the body and of political life impinge upon the search for truth and disrupt it. But the search

⁴¹ Ibid., 226.

⁴² Hannah Arendt, *The Life of The Mind*, Vol. 2 (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1978), 160.

⁴³ It is interesting to note that one among the many reasons Foucault would have for refuting this claim is that, for him, late Stoicism places reduced emphasis on the goodness of the parts when seen from the perspective of the whole, and instead argues that suffering is not an evil for the contrasting reason that suffering gives you an opportunity to exercise your virtue. Without undergoing suffering, you have no opportunity to practice exercising your virtue, and so, in a sense, an evil can always be turned to your benefit in the same way the tests of physical skill imposed by a trainer can always be turned to the advantage of a gymnast who uses them to practice his skill. In this sense, Stoicism does not require you to deny that you are suffering when you are suffering, or that evil is a reality; far from denying its painfulness, the Stoics considers it good precisely insofar as it is painful. Foucault even remarks that this may be one way to respond to that same criticism of Stoicism Cicero makes in the same spirit as Arendt, that it would have us “think away” suffering (Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 442).

for truth must continue even while the world recedes into the distance, and is all but completely forgotten. In order to achieve its aim, the search for truth must therefore free us from our former awareness of the world; *it must render our concern for the world obsolete*.⁴⁴

For Foucault, however, the “philosophic perspective” Seneca exhorts us to adopt gives us more than just an ability to “think away” unpleasant thoughts. True, “it will enable us to grasp the pettiness and the false and artificial character of everything that seemed good to us before...Wealth, pleasure, glory: all these transitory events will take on their real proportions again when, through this stepping back we reach the point where the secrets of the world open to us.”⁴⁵ What is gained however is this: The self is “lifted above the world and dragged from the shadows made by the world here.”⁴⁶ *Illo perducit unde lucet*—the exercise ‘leads us by force to where the light comes to us.’⁴⁷ Like Scipio, who also sees armies that appear as so many ants from a great height, he disabuses himself of the false belief that his actions will have a lasting influence in history. Once he shifts his perspective, the belief that military glory is a pursuit-worthy end cannot be consistently maintained.⁴⁸

This is then a hermeneutic in which the individual shifts his or her perspective in one, it must be remembered, of *many* possible ways. The *shift-in-perspective* makes it possible for entrenched beliefs to lose their currency because they cannot be consistently maintained while this shift-in-perspective takes place. In this sense, Foucault is right to observe that this exercise in thought “completes the detachment from flaws and vices,” whose source always lies in false beliefs.⁴⁹

Foucault comes dangerously close to asserting this perspective is a universal one, and for this reason, it is sometimes necessary to read Foucault against himself, in order to salvage his original insight that this is *not* what it is. One indeed sees why Foucault would almost be led to assert this. For it is from this new perspective that we may see particulars in a new light. We survey the world from on high and then, seeing the relationship between things, view our place among them in a new way. This *could* mean that the universal perspective “sheds light”⁵⁰ on ourselves and our relationship to other particulars because a broad, or all-

⁴⁴Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 162. For Arendt, the Stoics have simply seized and elaborated upon the Aristotelian idea that thought is an activity that is self-contained and detached from the world. Needing nothing for itself but its own exercise, thinking is an activity unlike every other that can be a source of pleasure, since the rest depend upon something or somebody else in the external world (*Pol.* 1267a12).

⁴⁵Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 277.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 274.

⁴⁷*Quest. Nat.* 1.pr.2.7.

⁴⁸“Reaching this point enables us to dismiss and exclude all the false values and all the false dealings in which we are caught up...” (*Ibid.*, 277).

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 275.

⁵⁰The mistake would also be to place too much emphasis on vision as a metaphor for learning. We learn through practice and exercise, and insofar as learning can be compared to perception at all, it is not vision, Foucault notes, to which it is analogous: “We do not learn virtue by looking. it is and can only be learned through the ear because virtue cannot be separated from the *logos*, that is to say from rational language, from language really present, expressed and articulated verbally in sounds and rationally by reason. The *logos* can

encompassing outlook on the world suffices to illuminate all we need to know about the things in it, *including ourselves*. This would amount to a general knowledge of the world that would give one *objective knowledge of the self*, as if it were one among other objects to which some universal truth applied. But it is important to recognize that this “philosophic perspective” cannot be confused with a universal one *from which we can logically deduce facts about particulars and ourselves*. If Foucault sometimes implies this, then it is not in the spirit of his own work.⁵¹

Nor for that matter, is the related idea that ethical life is simply a matter of taking truths that have their philosophical basis outside of practical life and attempting to apply them *in* or *to* practical life. This is to say we must take universal truths, at which we arrive through philosophic practice, and “apply” them to our lived experience of the world. Here, truth is still something general and universal to be *applied* to particular states-of-affairs.

Foucault is at his best when he describes Seneca as needing to take up a view outside himself, not in order to attain a universal truth that can be applied in particular circumstances, but in order to *free* himself from himself.⁵² In this sense, philosophy still remains a way of freeing oneself of false opinion. But instead of appealing to a universal truth in relation to which individual truths can be judged false, what appears at first glance to be a “philosophic perspective,” is assumed only for the space of time required to loosen the grip of certain false beliefs on the mind. They can then give way to truer belief in a process of substitution that is always piecemeal; the removal of one false thought creates the possibility for a true thought to emerge in its place. Everyday perspectives must therefore withstand the test of a shift-in-perspective if they are to hold good, and since, when this perspective is assumed, particular perspectives cannot be held quite as firmly, they must slip away and be discarded. We shall now see that this is how Seneca sees things.

Seneca on Self-Transformation

That Foucault is correct to avow Stoicism’s distinctness will become clearer if we now consider the practical steps the Stoic takes in order to prepare himself to receive the truth. He prepares himself by means of the aforementioned shedding of false beliefs. This could be mistaken for a Christian act of self-renunciation. However, in his ninety-fifth letter Seneca elaborates upon this process of divesting oneself of false beliefs, and explains why it cannot be mistaken for Christian self-renunciation.

only penetrate through the ear, and thanks to the sense of hearing” (Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 336).

⁵¹ For Foucault it is all too often presumed that we must attain a knowledge of the world that can also be applied to the self: “In the last two lectures, I wanted to show that when the question of the relationship between the subject and knowledge is posed in the culture of the self of the Hellenistic and Roman period, the question never arises of whether the subject is objectifiable (*objectivable*), whether the same mode of knowledge can be applied to the subject as is applied to things of the world and whether the subject is really one of the knowable things of the world” (Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 318).

⁵² *Ibid.*, 272-275.

Seneca distinguishes between *praecepta* and *decreta* as the two different forms that truth can take. Philosophers have looked upon *praecepta* with dissatisfaction, and with reason. We are all taught that there is nothing philosophically profound about pithy platitudes such as “be faithful to your wife.” Part of the problem is that such platitudes are so easily exposed as lacking universality, and thus not genuinely philosophical. They do not apply broadly at all times and all places to all people, and what was Socrates searching for if not the good in precisely this sense, not just as it appeared at some places at some moments, but as it appeared in all places at all times?⁵³ But neither were the Stoics so naïve as to place all their faith in *praecepta*. As Seneca explains:

It will be of no avail to give precepts unless you remove the obstacles to precepts; it will do no more good than to place weapons by your side and bring yourself closer to the foe without having your arms free to use those weapons. The soul, in order to deal with the precepts we offer, must first be set free.⁵⁴

As with any belief, even the best precepts will encounter obstacles in the falsehood-ridden mind. To memorize a precept telling you how to behave towards your wife does not mean that it will “sink in,” as Seneca says. The part of you that still accepts opposing beliefs will never leave your mind free enough to grasp hold of the truth, and as a result, when next confronted with a something you have long considered desirable, you will continue to act on those thoughts—until your mind is set free of them.

But this is then crucial: How is the mind set free? This is where *decreta* come in. *Decreta* in Latin or *dogmata* in Greek are general beliefs about the world that provide one with a broad outlook on it. They are analogous to the all-encompassing outlook Seneca and Scipio try to adopt toward creation. They are perhaps best thought of as overarching beliefs, but as we shall see, they do not function as the foundational premises of an ethical theory from which conclusions could be directly deduced about how to conduct oneself in particular circumstances. Rather, each is best thought of as *persuasio ad totam pertinens vitam*, that is as ‘a belief pertaining to the whole of life’.⁵⁵

⁵³ It is generally acknowledged that the Stoics at least differ from Plato’s Socrates in that they wish to be guided not *just* by a conception of the universal good, but also by their sense of where the good lies in particular circumstances. What is less clear is how the Stoics propose to follow rules that are not derived from universal rules. Specifically, how did they hope to avoid the difficulties into which Aristotle is supposed to have fallen in attempting something similar. Inwood puts it best: “If the Stoics similarly recognize a similar need for situational sensitivity, and combine this with a developed interest in systematic moral injunctions (either called ‘rules’ or ‘natural law’), how can they escape dealing with the dilemma that Aristotle evaded only by leaving his theory of rules vague” (Brad Inwood, “Rules and Reasoning in Stoic Ethics,” in Katerina Ierodiakonou (ed.), *Topics in Stoic Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 104.

⁵⁴ *Ep.* xcv.83.

⁵⁵ *Ep.* xcv.44.

While we depend upon the *praecepta* that pertain only in particular contexts, *praecepta* alone do not suffice, for as Seneca says, “precepts by themselves are weak and rootless.”⁵⁶ And here is where *decreta* come in:

As leaves cannot flourish by their own efforts, but need a branch to which they may cling and from which they may draw sap, so your precepts, when taken alone, wither away; they must be grafted on a school of philosophy.⁵⁷

What Seneca means is that nobody can begin to take to heart the precept “do not hunger after riches” if their general outlook on life is not Stoic. Only to a person who already has a sense that virtue alone is valuable will the idea that money is worthless make any sense, and only in the mind of such a person can the precept take root. Thusly, *decreta* provide us with a general philosophic outlook on the world in the context of which individual *precepta* make sense, the backdrop against which they appear intelligible.

Seneca goes so far as to say that a relatively unspoiled mind should have no need of *decreta* at all. A few simple precepts sufficed for the ancestors, when life was simple and people had not yet begun to corrupt their pre-reflective instincts by living unnatural lives. Then, “it did not take a mighty effort to bring the spirit back to the simplicity from which it had departed only slightly...Now, in order to root out a deep-seated belief in wrong ideas, conduct must be regulated by doctrines.”⁵⁸

If these larger beliefs bring unity to the mind by helping to cultivate the common soil in which many beliefs about particulars grow—by being the branch from which true beliefs may derive their strength and flourish—then they perform this function all the more by providing a branch from which false beliefs cannot suck sap, and for that reason, wither and die. Thus, they contribute powerfully to the process of weeding the soul of false beliefs:

Peace of mind is only attained by those who have fixed and unchanging judgment; the rest of mankind continually ebb and flow in their decisions, floating in a condition where they alternately seek things and reject them. And what is the reason for this tossing to and fro? It is because nothing is clear to them, because they make use of a most unsure criterion—rumor. If you would always desire the same things, you must desire the truth. (*si vis eandem semper velle, verum oportet veis*). But one cannot attain the truth without doctrines; for doctrines embrace the whole of life.⁵⁹

Seneca also writes:

We must set before our eyes the goal of the supreme good, towards which we may strive, and to which all our acts and our words may have reference—just as sailors must guide their

⁵⁶ *Ep.* xcv.12

⁵⁷ *Ep.* xcv.60.

⁵⁸ *Ep.* xcv.34.

⁵⁹ *Ep.* xcv.57.

course according to a certain star. Life without ideals is erratic: as soon as an ideal is to be set up, doctrines begin to be necessary (*vida sine proposito vagaest; quod siutique proponendum est, incupiant necessaria esse decreta*).⁶⁰

In this last passage Seneca explains that we need the more expansive, totalizing view of the whole that philosophical *decreta* supply to keep ourselves from behaving erratically. *Praecepta* concern the worth we assign to particular objects, but our *praecepta* may lead us to value different things at different times, if not different things at the same time, and if we want to consistently pursue our ultimate aim in life, we must have an abiding sense of what it is—and our only sense of our *telos* is supplied to us by philosophers in the form of *decreta*.

But this broader philosophical perspective on the ultimate good in life is interesting for what it is *not*. It is *not* supposed to receive its final justification from anything but the many particular beliefs that accord with it. This is true despite passages like the following:

Suppose that a man is acting as he should; he cannot do it constantly or consistently since he will not know why he does it. Some of his conduct will result rightly because of luck or practice; but there will be no standard (*regula*) in his hand to which they may be held, by means of which he may believe to be right in what he does. One who is good on accident will not promise to be so forever.⁶¹

Here Seneca comes closest to suggesting that we need a general account of the good that can find universal application. The person who does their prescribed duty in the bedroom, and at the baths, and in the senate is well served by precepts, but because they will follow any and all precepts, they may occasionally employ the wrong ones. If they are to consistently follow the right ones, and thus achieve a stable character, they must have a *regula*,⁶² a ‘measure’ or ‘standard,’ something against which to measure their *precepts*, and *decreta* perform this function adequately by simply remaining that with which *praecepta* must accord and not explicitly contradict. *Decreta* are not the measure of *praecepta* in the sense of being that from which *praecepta* must be deducible if they are to be valid at all.

⁶⁰ Ep. xcv.46.

⁶¹ Ep. xcv.39.

⁶² Inwood would like to identify *formae* and *regulae* as rules “which link up their moral principles with concrete actions and decision contexts” (Inwood, “Rules and Reasoning in Stoic Ethics,” 109). Given the evidence that rules like “always return a deposit” and “never commit suicide” are acknowledged to have many exceptions, this leads Inwood to conclude that expertly following rules means knowing when they don’t apply—that is, knowing when to break them (Ibid., 111). Thus, having need of something that “mediates between situational sensitivity and the need for stable general principles,” they invented another category of rules, “general rules of thumb,” that mediate between *decreta* and *praecepta*, “allowing us to find the balance between abstract theory and the rules of a particular context” (Ibid., 110). But easier than positing the existence of another category of rules besides *decreta* and *praecepta* in order to explain how one informs the other would be to deny that this is the case. For one only has need of some way to derive precepts from *decreta*, if one still believes that *praecepta* must be, if not directly deduced from *decreta*, then at least directly derived from them (Ibid., 126).

To put the question in the language of theory and praxis—does one need to have a theoretical outlook on the world that is independently established on its own rational bases? No, *decreta* are not universal truths we need to establish in order to infer how we should act in particular circumstances,⁶³ and they are not even independently established by reason independently of our pre-reflective attitudes and preconceptions. They actually appeal for their support to these attitudes and preconceptions.

This is not to say that our attitudes and preconceptions cannot lead us astray, but it is to say that we cannot hope to set them aside all at once and then, by the sheer force of reason attain some more universal truth. Or, that setting them aside, we can attain some universal truth from which we can then infer which of our preconceptions are right and which are wrong. Nor as we have said, is our possession of an external stand against which to hold up individual beliefs what sets the process of self-transformation in motion.

Platonism, Christianity, Stoicism

We are now prepared to attempt to explain the difference between Stoicism, Platonism, and Christianity. We begin with their similarities. Stoicism, just as well as Platonism and Christianity, requires what could be construed as a certain measure of self-renunciation, and in this respect Stoics are not unlike most philosophers, especially Platonists. We all know the well-worn caricature of the philosopher who turns away from the appearing world, in order to liberate the self from the body, its prison. In Platonism, and in Stoicism to some degree, the goal is to liberate a “true self” from a “false self” that prevents it from seeing the truth; liberated from the false self, the true self can perceive the truth.

In both traditions, before the process of self-transformation can begin, certain beliefs must be cast aside. The difference between Platonism and Stoicism is that in Stoicism, the answer to the question of *which* must be stripped away cannot be predetermined in advance. In effect, no easy answer can be given to the question of which part of the self must be cast aside and which “true self” will remain, because there is no “true self” to speak of except a set of true opinions, which are, as yet, indistinguishable from many other false opinions. Here we have no standard by which to distinguish between true beliefs and false; in Stoicism we cannot therefore cast off a certain part of ourselves we *already know to be constituted of false beliefs*, or *expect the self that remains to have its own means to access the truth*.

Again, the activities in which Platonists, Christians, and Stoics are engaged share a commonality, and this must be brought to the fore as this point of commonality also provides a standard of comparison.⁶⁴ All three emphasize the circularity of the process of self-

⁶³ Even when interpreters are not explicitly arguing that it is from universal truths we infer how to act in particular situations, they betray their belief that this is so. Sellars, for example, dwells upon Epictetus’ demand that *ta theôermata*, or ‘philosophic principles,’ be “digested,” as if to imply that it were simply a matter of internalizing principles with limitless applicability, his assumption being that once these universal truths are learned, they can be applied again and again in different times and places (John Sellars, *The Art of Living: The Stoics on the Nature and function of Philosophy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 121-123; cf. (Epictetus, *Ench.* 46)).

⁶⁴ Even though Foucault makes explicit reference only to the fact that these dynamics were best analyzed as “circular relations” (see for example Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 255), we are justified in this belief

transformation in which they are engaged. The more one comes to *know* the truth, the more one comes to *be* the self one desires to be, and the more one comes to *be* this self, the more one *knows* the truth.

For Foucault the Platonic dynamic is symptomatic of a deeper and more enduring way in which we still assume one passes from self-ignorance to self-knowledge, and in the process, from darkness into light. In Platonism you must discover who you truly are, and thereby discover a deep truth that you have long since forgot. By coming to know your inner self, you come to know a deeper truth. But there is a hermeneutic at work here, and the process is, again, cyclical: in order to know yourself, you have to know what you already know “deep down inside yourself” about the world, but you can only know this, by regaining knowledge of who you have been all along. In Foucault’s words, “The soul discovers what it is by recalling what it has seen. And it is by recalling what it is, that it finds access to what it has seen.”⁶⁵

This explains the difference between the hermeneutic circle in Stoicism and Platonism: For Platonists, a personal relationship to the truth is guaranteed by a type of feedback loop between the self and the truth, in which the more one wants to know the truth in general, the more one has to know about one’s “true self.” Thus, if one wishes to regain knowledge of what one knows “deep down inside oneself,” one must try to regain knowledge of who one truly is and has been all along. For this reason, Foucault avers, if there is a hermeneutic at work in Platonism, the point-of-entry through which Platonists pass into this circle of interpretation lies in gaining knowledge of their “true selves.”

Compare this with the hermeneutic circle in Stoicism—and here is what Foucault makes less clear: Its distinguishing feature is that it is not a *closed* circle in which the subject’s self-conception reinforces and is reinforced by a certain conception of the truth. The very *problem* for the Stoic is that he or she already begins with a sense of the truth that is self-reinforcing. The Stoic already begins with a conception of the truth that is self-supporting, and which, if it has any relationship to the Stoic’s self-conception at all, may serve to reinforce it. It is the rigid and intractable entanglement of Scipio’s thoughts with each other that must be broken up—precisely through a shift in perspective. And if this shift in perspective has any result at all, it will not result in the reinforcing, but just as Foucault says, in the “questioning of the identity of the self.”⁶⁶

The hermeneutic at work is one in which one’s relationship to particulars is adjusted in relationship to one’s view of the whole. But one’s view of the whole is of course shaped by one’s view of particulars. We have here something like a vicious circle, and there is no escaping it, though as Paul Veyne remarks, “This seemingly vicious circle troubles some Stoics greatly, but we moderns call it the hermeneutic circle and realize there is nothing vicious

because in no instance does the subject ever have immediate and unmediated access to his or her self; the self’s inquiry into itself must always pass through another medium, through which the subject can gain knowledge of itself.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 255.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 230.

about it.”⁶⁷ This vicious circle, or depending on your perspective, “virtuous cycle,” has for Veyne the implication that the individual truths we live by, our ethical precepts, are shaped and turn shape how we view the world as a whole. “The whole cannot be understood without an understanding of the precepts, but a precept cannot be understood apart from the whole.”⁶⁸

If Stoicism is then distinguished from Platonism, it is by what sets off a process that is cyclical. It is distinguished by the point of entry through which one enters a hermeneutic circle. Platonism enters through the self, but Stoicism enters, by questioning the very beliefs of which the self is constituted.

Nevertheless, just as in Platonism, a hermeneutic sets itself going when one increasingly learns to cast off a false “self”—i.e. false beliefs—so that one is left with a self that, unencumbered by false beliefs, has an increasingly strong relationship to the truth. Thus, for the Stoic, the self is reconstituted around a set of true beliefs. Because one’s self emerges when one has cast off a false self, the process is not un-Platonic. Just as in Platonism, the more “certain” one becomes of the truth, the more “certain” one becomes of who one truly *is*, and vice versa.

What of the external world? In Platonism, as well as in Christianity, one passes through the knowledge of one’s true self *to* the knowledge of the truth—a truth the self can perceive only once it has shifted its attention *away from the external world* and refocused it *on* the self. The more one focuses one’s attention on the world, the more likely one is to be taken in by false appearances. So far we have seen that Stoicism is essentially of a piece with Christianity and Platonism in requiring that we divert our attention *away* from external things that have a tendency to exert a distorting influence upon our perception of the world. “When the precept ‘care about the self’ takes on the scope, the generality, the radical and absolute character of ‘one must change one’s life to turn around on oneself and seek to get back to oneself,’” Foucault asks, “does not the precept ‘convert to the self’ then entail the partial or no doubt total transfer of the gaze, of attention, of the focal point of the mind, away from things of the world and towards oneself?”⁶⁹

It is more than a question of simply diverting our attention *away* from the world *per se*. The influence the world has upon us is only injurious insofar as it takes the form of false beliefs that are socially inculcated, and it is precisely these that must be removed before we can perceive the truth. It is just as true in Stoicism as in Platonism that in order to transform oneself, one must turn *away* from the world—if what one means is ‘turning away from the falsehoods that are taught to us by society at large.’ However, when the Platonic philosopher turns away from the outside world, he or she also turns away from an outer world towards an *inner* world, an *inner* self, one that cannot clearly be distinguished from the self that has come under the influence of the outside world, but one that is guaranteed to “see” the truth *independently* of it.

⁶⁷ Paul Veyne, *Seneca: the Life of a Stoic*, translated by David Sullivan (New York & London: Routledge, 2003), 77.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 252-3.

In Stoicism the sheer impossibility of telling where and outer world of falsity ends and an inner world of truth begins changes the whole nature of the process, with significant practical ramifications. Certain opinions, derived from the external world, must be shed before the truth can appear as such, but whereas this process receives a jump-start in Platonism, since one *already* knows, more or less, *which* externally-derived opinions can and must be shed, things are never so easy in Stoicism. While it may be true, in a certain sense, that beliefs must be discarded if a new perspective is to be had, the subject cannot abandon them *all at once*. One could say that it is a matter of the relative extremes to which the Platonist, and more so, the Christian, will go to cast off pre-reflective beliefs, in order to get the whole process started. That would be putting it correctly. For the Stoic, a set of externally-derived opinions *cannot* be shed *en masse*, as they can for the Platonist or Christian, precisely because the Stoic does not know *which* opinions are false, and are *only* held because they have been thrust upon him or her by the external world—and *which* are true, and would be held whether or not the external world interfered.

*Correctly understood therefore, we can agree with the first of two claims that Foucault makes for the Stoics: they do not make self-renunciation an essential part of the process of self-transformation.*⁷⁰

The Care of the Self and the Political

Seneca cautions Lucilius not to summarily reject the opinions and attitudes of the masses, writing to him “This is the mean of which I approve; our life should observe a happy mean between the ways of a sage and the ways of the world at large; all men should admire it, but they should understand it also.”⁷¹ This could merely be read as a strong conservative streak in Seneca making itself apparent, but this statement should be interpreted in light of the Stoic idea that false beliefs must be removed one by one, in a process that is always halting and piecemeal.

The whole process gains its political significance from the outset, from the fact that its aim is to unfetter and unburden the self of the false opinions that have been forced upon it by

⁷⁰ Related to the fact that the Stoic did not reject common opinion all at once is the fact that knowledge of the external world—which is at best a distraction and at worst an obstacle for the Platonist—retained its importance for the Stoic. Insofar as the Stoic sought self-knowledge at all, “this self-knowledge was definitely not an alternative to knowledge of nature. It was not a question of either knowing nature or knowing ourselves” (Ibid., 259). The Stoic’ turn away from falsity seems not to demand a turn *away from the world towards an inner world which lays bare the path to truth*. Thus the knowledge of the outer world is never surpassed in importance by the knowledge of the inner world inside the self. Accordingly, the Stoic does not attain a self-knowledge that is sought at the cost of the world. This is evidenced by the fact that Seneca gains knowledge by turning *to* the world, in an attempt to gain a knowledge of it that will shed further light on himself—without, it should be added, simply allowing his situation to be used as single case exemplifying a more general rule or principle about the nature of reality. Nor can the subject set the process going by an appeal to some truth behind appearances. There must be a change of perspective, which cannot imply an “escape” from one plane of existence to another—not an ontological flight, as Foucault says from one kind of being to another, in which the ascent thereto could be an easy means of “escaping” a falsity easily distinguished from the truth (Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 259).

⁷¹ *Ep.* v.5.

society at large. But neither is it *just* a question of freedom from false opinion and truth for its own sake. It is only once we have cast off the shackles of false opinion that we appear before others and before ourselves as able to perceive the truth of things. Only then can we be seen in the eyes of others and ourselves, as being worthy of being invested with political power. In this sense, the whole process is political to begin with, but it is even more politically charged to the extent that the opinions we must cast off are precisely those that hold sway in the public sphere, and that are taken as “commonsensical” by the populous at large.

Who indeed would invest political power in the person who claimed to be in possession of the truth even after they had rejected half of what passed for common sense? On what grounds did the Stoics think that a person, one who claimed to be in possession of a truth flagrantly contradicting common sense, could appear as knowledgeable in the eyes of others? A Platonist could certainly not appear so in the eyes of others. For rejecting all at once, *in toto*, a vast set of widely held opinions and embracing a truth which appeared to one’s inner self at the moment when all those commonly held opinions had been rejected and discarded as “mere appearance” —that would not recommend one to others as a truth teller.

But even though one’s opinions might jar and clash with common opinion, it was possible to appear before others as a truth teller—if one could show that one had *not* acted the part of a Platonist. In other words, only if one could show that one had *not* simply rejected the external and outside world outright, and that one had instead engaged in the labored task of divesting oneself of false opinions, bit by bit, one at a time—then, and only then, could one appear as in possession of the truth. To recapitulate: only if one started out by accepting and remaining in general agreement with conventional thinking and popular wisdom could one appear to others as having arrived by legitimate means at a more unconventional truth. *This was the essential paradox: only if one started out from a position of relative conservatism could one appear as a radical political thinker.*

In sum, in order to appear as a truth-teller one could not begin from the premature exclusion of a set of beliefs and the immediate appeal to a truth whose validity was supported by a conception of the self. One had first to engage, over a sustained period of time, in refashioning, around a set of carefully chosen beliefs, a new self whose existence could not have been imagined in advance. Or in Foucault’s words, “the subject must not start out from a sense of himself, but must advance towards something that is himself.”⁷²

Thus, the Stoic does not turn inward in expectation of finding an “inner self” unveiled in its untouched state, since his or her self must not simply be rediscovered but re-created, not simply unearthed but re-fashioned. With the hope of simply rediscovering instead of wholly replacing the self, goes all incentive for hurriedly casting off worldly encumbrances in order to see the “truth inside oneself” the better. Nothing certain is accomplished and much risked by casting off worldly beliefs and worldly attachments (some of which may be perfectly valid) all at once. This is what makes Stoicism a philosophy of gradualism *by definition*. Seneca may often be seen to compromise his rigorous Stoicism, in urging that we not throw aside our worldly attachments all at once, that we not disdainfully abjure the thoughts and feelings of

⁷² Ibid., 248.

the masses. But it should be argued not that he compromises his Stoicism; his Stoicism is a philosophy of compromise.

For it were only if Stoicism were a philosophy like Platonism that one could abandon all one's normal habits and all one's ties to the world and turn inward to an inner truth, as though it would await one there once all one's ties to reality had been cut. Such would presuppose that one could simply abandon one's pre-reflective judgments about the world on the supposition that, once one had discarded them, one would be able to establish *independently* and *only* via self-knowledge, a personal relationship to the truth, without their help. But an appeal to one's true self is not introduced at any stage in the process of discovering truth. Contrary to Christianity and Platonism, in which "we must be able to say the truth about ourselves, in order to be able to establish a relationship to truth and general in which we will be able to find our salvation,"⁷³ there is nothing buried deep within the Stoics' soul to which he may appeal in order to set going the process of discovering a truth and removing falsity.

*Correctly understood therefore, we can now agree with the second of the two claims that Foucault makes about the Stoics: they do not make gaining knowledge of oneself—that is to say, knowledge of one's "true" self—an essential part of caring for the self.*⁷⁴

The Divine

Turning now to a further claim Foucault makes for the Stoics, is it true that the Stoic is less concerned than the Socrates of the *Alcibiades* with discovering the god within? Does he not also turn his gaze inward in order to catch sight of that within himself whose divinity he must recognize? It seems that every form of ascetic practice since Platonism has shared in common with it the aim of aiding converts to find the divine within, and this in order that they may become acquainted with the divine element pervading the cosmos as a whole, so that the whole process "involves the soul knowing its own nature, and on this basis, having access to what is connatural to the soul."⁷⁵ Foucault can only deny this by minimizing and diminishing its importance in Stoicism relative to Platonism and Christianity.⁷⁶ But while it is true that aligning oneself with the divine is an absolute necessity, there is no question of achieving a connection to the divine by "looking" for it inside oneself.

The metaphor of looking is never used. We do not realize our inner divinity by "sighting it," as though it were already there to be seen; it is not an inner essence permanently on view for and visible to an eye of the mind that "looks" for it. One's connection to the divine is not so much preexistent as established, and has to be won by actively harmonizing one's ac-

⁷³ Ibid., 364.

⁷⁴ Two additional Foucault makes are that (1) the care of the self is decoupled from self-knowledge, and (2) the little self-knowledge that the care of the self demands is decoupled from recognizing the divine element in oneself (Ibid., 420).

⁷⁵ Ibid., 455.

⁷⁶ "You know the principle of *homoiôsis tō theô*, of assimilation to God, how the necessity of recognizing oneself as participating in divine reason, or even as a substantial part of the divine reason that organizes the world is very present in the Stoics. However, I do not think this recognition of oneself as divine element occupies the central place it has in Platonism and Neo-Platonism (Ibid., 420).

tions with nature—without directly trying to gain theoretical or speculative knowledge of nature. This done, one's actions become an extension of nature, as divine as nature itself. In this sense alone is it possible to say we "discover" the god within. Thus, there is no "true divine self" to be uncovered deep inside the individual, only a "true divine self" to emerge in interaction with the external world.

Conclusions

We have grasped Stoicism's specificity. We should therefore hope to have justified Foucault's claim that Stoicism is an ethical tradition that is different in significant respects from the Platonic or Christian. We have done this without in the least minimizing or diminishing the real commonalities between Stoicism, Platonism, and Christianity that Foucault's critics believe he disregards. This is important because it means that we can vindicate Foucault's analysis.

It is also important because it means that we, Foucault's readers, can appreciate to just what extent Stoicism represents the possibility of forming a different relationship to oneself with political implications. Foucault himself is notoriously evasive about the direct political implications of his historical research and this is nowhere more true than with respect to his late work, but he gives us a brief glimpse of the implications he expects this work to have when he writes, "I think we may have to suspect that we find it impossible today to constitute an ethic of the self, even though it may be an urgent, fundamental, and politically indispensable task, if it is true after all that there is no first or final point of resistance to political power other than in the relationship one has to oneself"⁷⁷ If we understand by governmentality, a set of power relations, then Foucault says, "I do not think that reflection on this notion of governmentality can avoid passing through, theoretically and practically, the element of a subject defined by the relationship of self to self."⁷⁸ Indeed, we hope to have shown that, because of the relationship in which he stands to the truth and to himself, the Stoic finds himself embedded in these power relations differently than the Platonist or Christian. He finds himself less firmly in their grip because of his own personal relationship to the truth.

Foucault focuses on certain features of Platonism, and Christianity because they are still with us today. We have inherited from Platonism and Christianity an approach to ethics with three notable characteristics: The first of these is the individual's *connaissance* or 'knowledge' of him- or herself. The second is the individual's obedience to universally binding laws. The third is self-renunciation as a prerequisite for perceiving the truth. Usually, one must, based on a preconception of the truth one is supposed to find at the end of the process, and based on preemptory understanding of the self that can alone know this truth, undertake a process of self-renunciation for the sake of both. To quote Foucault, we have *ascèsis qui renonce à soi en fonction d'une Parole qui a été dite par un Autre*, 'an asceticism that renounces the self in service to a Word that has been spoken by an Other.'⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Ibid., 252.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 252.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 327; *L'Herméneutique du sujet*, 313 (my translation).

In Platonism and Christianity socially inculcated beliefs are only reinforced, as others can intervene in the process more directly in order to tell us what the truth is, and by the re-discovery of what parts of ourselves and the rejection of others we will attain it. *The care of the self in which the Platonist and Christian engage cannot therefore have as its end to help the subject attain a personal and private relationship to the truth. It cannot prepare the subject to reenter the political and social sphere by freeing the subject of society's influence.*

This dynamic is significantly altered in Stoicism, and not just for the reasons Foucault gives.⁸⁰ These are rather the effect than the cause of Stoicism's particularity. The difference between the Stoic and his Christian and Platonic counterparts goes deeper to the very way the Stoic believes the truth is to be attained.

The fundamental difference, we have argued, that separates the Stoic from the Platonist and the Christian is that he does not start from a fixed understanding of his "true" self that reinforces and is reinforced by other truths he accepts. This will not aid but *impede* him in his explicit aim, which is to liberate himself from false beliefs *society* has already instilled in him. He must liberate himself from these beliefs if he is to be acknowledged by others as a subject of the truth, and if he is to enter the political arena full in the knowledge that he has the truth. Only in Stoicism is it one's explicit aim to free oneself of the relationships one has to the truth mediated by society, and to reestablish a personal and private relationship to it, away from the influence of society. *This must be done before one enters the political arena.*

This has all been to show that, contrary to what Foucault himself suggests, it is possible to speak of personal relationship that one can establish with the truth that exists in some sense prior to politics, and which nonetheless informs politics. It only appears that by studying the search for truth as it was carried out between two or more people Foucault addressed a more explicitly political topic. In fact, the act of seeking the truth is nowhere more political for Foucault than when it is carried out privately by the Stoic in perfect solitude and isolation from society. Foucault therefore did not have to abandon the train of thought that lead him to the Stoics to find something in ancient thought of immediate and real political significance.

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⁸⁰ While self-renunciation is still a necessary prerequisite for access to the truth, it is these last two aspects of ethical practice that are absent from its Stoic forerunners. "In fact," Foucault says, "neither of these two problems (of the subject's obedience to law and of the subject's knowledge of himself) was really fundamental or present in the thought of ancient culture" (Ibid., 319).